

## DRESSAGE FOR NATIVES

by Sylvia Loch

Top hats and tails, canter pirouettes and a pounding extended trot ! For most, these images of dressage sum up pictures of tall horses with powerful gaits and often egos to boot! But is this being realistic? Why can't dressage equally be soft, versatile, malleable, and light? I believe it can - and on any breed of horse, pony or cob.

In 1995 we started the Classical Riding Club and one of the things that attracted our present membership of over 800 worldwide was the fact we invited all types of equine (and their owners!) to be involved with dressage. Whether this was in active competition or merely to improve their general riding for hacking, showing, long distance, cross-country or jumping did not matter. Dressage after all is nothing more than the correct schooling of the horse, so done with knowledge it will improve any horse or pony for all disciplines. It may also lengthen his life, keep him sounder and fitter, whilst making him generally a much safer and nicer ride.

The whole idea behind CRC therefore was to get people away from this idea that one has to own a million dollar horse to reach a high level of equitation. We also wanted to show that dressage should be fun and that one should never be afraid or discouraged to ask the reason why. So often in the past people have been cowed and berated by instructors who either shout as though on the parade ground, or who brook no questions when it comes to a problem. We developed a Trainers List, sympathetic to the idea that openness and discussion is the only way for knowledge to spread and we set up a networking system where people with training problems could get free advice from others.

Many of our members owned 'different' breeds. There were those countless letters from people who wrote things like "...I own a Highland and would love to school to say passage or even piaffe, but I know he'll never be much good at lengthened strides!" .... or, "...My Connemara cross is fantastic to ride but the moment I take her into a dressage arena, I feel the judge thinking - 'oh, it's one of those!'" ... or "I've no ambition to compete at all, but I would like to know how to get my rather heavy cob off her forehead."

As the owner of Lusitanos which come in many different guises, some very thick-necked and upright through the shoulder and often compared to a big Highland except with finer legs, or sometimes an Irish Draught - I had a lot of sympathy with these people. There is no doubt that today's dressage tests were originally designed with big, rangy horses in mind. If we delve back into the history of competition dressage we learn that it was the Germans who first developed today's tests after the wars. Moreover, they also wrote the rules and judging criteria with their newly redundant cavalry warmbloods in mind. Yet

some centuries prior to that, the Iberian and native breeds had been just as much in demand, since they were the forerunners of the art of skirmish and - in a different way - had to be equally athletic!

This motivated me to write new tests for a smaller arena and to introduce an alternative form of judging which might redress the balance for the natives, the moorlands, the heavy horse and the Iberian breeds. As the tests took off, we actually found that all the breeds were benefitting because the system was designed to reward the rider as much as the horse! It was also helping many for their affiliated tests as we have always said this should work in complement to British Dressage, not against.

So what is my approach when training the stockier or heavier type of horse or pony? First and foremost, I want to help him come off the forehand and develop strength behind so he can balance more on his hocks. But to help him to do this I generally need to improve the rider's seat. If the rider is out of the balance, how can the horse ever be motivated to change his balance?

Another factor reared its ugly head. Too many people were putting the cart in front of the horse, and with these breeds the last thing I wanted at this stage was to stretch him long and low. If he is already on the forehand - why put him down further? He stretches every time he goes out to graze, so it's much more a case of teaching the hindlegs to flex and carry more weight and to bring the balance back.

To do this I had to give the rider the tools. People had this idea it was all to do with drawreins or more hand. Quite the contrary! Only through transitions and exercises designed to bend and mobilise the hindlimb joints will the horse grow stronger behind, so practising lengthened strides would be crazy at this stage. We have to introduce an element of collection first and this is nothing to do with pulling on the front end, but all to do with raising his centre of gravity and engaging the quarters.

Clearly, it often takes an expert trainer to bring these qualities out in the horse, but once a rider understands what exercises to work on and what he or she should be looking for - they can begin to work quietly at home and be guided through books and videos until they are ready for the next stage. What I found heartbreaking was to hear of people paying good money to others only to end up with tears of frustration that their horse would never move like a warmblood! Of course not - each horse is different and we should rejoice in that. As regards schooling, 'Courses for horses' has always been my motto and every horse must be treated as an individual so that the training will complement his own particular conformation and give beautiful results!

One of the most satisfying combinations I ever met was Claire Molyneux with her Highland stallion - Farthing of Coulnacraig. I used to go up and take 3 day clinics at the Highland Riding Centre at Loch Ness and Claire came regularly with her own and her pupils' horses. She was already on the right track with this particular pony having had brilliant results in the showring at both Ingliston and later at Wembley. However, on our training sessions together we were able to take things higher, to the point at which we developed a very passable piaffe which made it so much easier for Farthing of Coulnacraig finally - but with patience to master his lengthened strides. As I have always said ...'first things first!'